"We'll Make Our History": Israeli and Palestinian Youth as Poetic Agents

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Caleb Hamman
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Introduction

Forms of political action and identities of political agents differ considerably across Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Political actions are violent and nonviolent, individual and collective, material and symbolic. They are organized and coordinated, and they arise organically, coming into being through everyday processes of negotiation and survival. Political actions erect walls and explode busses. They terrorize, traumatize, incarcerate, and kill. They write history, construct images, identify threats, and name and rename. And yet political actions also topple walls and transgress borders. They build communities, rebuild homes, establish friendships, adjust impressions, upset hierarchies, and restore life. Political actions reproduce and resolve conflict, and they exacerbate and alleviate human suffering. And just as they differ in shape and effect, political actions are colored differently by the agents behind them. Political agents are states and individuals, political parties and theatre groups, assassins and teachers. They vary in resources, in allegiances, and in aims, and they differ in age, in gender, and in class. Neither political actions nor political agents can be captured by rigid typology. They exist in permutation and combination, in flux, differing and contradicting across time and space. But however they shapeshift, both political actions and political agents remain enmeshed in contests of recognition, for whether an action or an agent is recognized as political is itself always a question of politics.

This paper, in short, analyzes and argues for recognition of a particular form of political action as exercised by a particular type of political agent in the spatial and
symbolic context of “Israel-Palestine.” The form of political action is everyday and primarily symbolic. The type of political agent is youth. The central claim of this paper is that Israeli and Palestinian youth exercise a type of everyday, symbolic, and creative political agency through which they make and transmit meanings, reveal and constitute themselves, build communities, and, ultimately, alter material realities. I call this type of agency *poetic agency*.

Poetic agency is to be distinguished from traditional conceptions of political agency in a number of ways. First, the term “political agency,” in so far as it is associated with canonical concepts of politics which associate politics with the distribution of material resources, connotes that political action is concerned with the same, i.e., with the manipulation of distributions of material social goods. Poetic agency, conversely, is concerned foremost with the manipulation of meaning and with interventions in symbolic systems. It is for this reason, foremost, that I use the term “poetic agency.” I do not use “poetic agency” to suggest that poetic action always involves the creation of poetry. Nor do I use the term to suggest that poetic action always involves the creation of formal art works more broadly conceived. Rather, I use “poetic agency” to suggest that, like the poet, poetic agents always operate first on the symbolic plane. However, I do not mean to suggest that poetic action is the only type of symbolic action, for a number of other features characterize poetic agency. For instance, though not always creating poetry, poetic agents are, like poets, necessarily characterized by acts of creation, for, as I argue below, poetic agents make new meanings through assertions of difference and through the exercise of Arendtian natality. Second, the term “poetic agency” is appropriate for

1 Harold Lasswell defined politics as “who gets what, when, and how” (1936). Canonical political theory, especially before the twentieth century, tended to address Laswell’s question in terms of material distributions, most notably in works on political economy, as in Locke or Marx, for example.
describing the agency I argue for here because, like most poets, poetic agents do their work through everyday, often unrecognized acts. Just as most poetry never achieves wide readership, most poetic actions go unnoticed and without acclaim. Like quotidian compositions, poetic actions make small meanings, often to no more than a small group of individuals. Finally, “poetic agency” is a fitting term for the agency I wish to describe because just as the poet reveals himself or herself to others through his or her poetry, so the poetic agent discloses his or her identity through poetic action. Both the poet and the poetic agent present and constitute the self through acts of creative meaning-making. For these reasons, I use the term “poetic agency” to refer to an agency characterized by symbolic, creative, and everyday acts which reveal and constitute the self and build relationships. This reference, i.e., my use of the term “poetic,” is intended only as a shorthand. It is not intended as a formal theoretical move. Rather, I deploy the term only for convenience, using it in attempt to connote in every case the full meaning of the complex agency I mean to address.

Poetic actions differ from canonical political actions in a number of ways. Whereas political actions are readily associated with the occasional, the material, and the destructive (for example, periodic elections, distributions of wealth, wars and terrorism), poetic actions are concerned with the everyday, the symbolic, and the creative (for example, negotiating occupation, rapping, and caretaking). Given its distinction from canonical political action, it is worth noting why poetic action remains political at all. It remains so for two reasons. First, because it involves manipulations of meaning—

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2 The revelation of the self that occurs in the act of composition must be understood as a kind of Arendtian “disclosure of the ‘who.’” As such, I do not mean to suggest that the poet necessarily reveals himself or herself in a straightforward or deliberate manner through poetry. Rather, the act of revelation is something much more subtle. Only rarely is it even intentional.
especially manipulations of meaning related to personal identity—poetic action directly affects the distributions of symbolic social goods individuals receive: for example, recognition, respect, reputation, and so forth. Second, as a consequence of manipulating the symbolic world, poetic action impacts secondarily material realities. By altering systems of meaning, poetic action affects, for example, how an individual will be perceived and, consequently, what material goods that individual will receive. For instance, poetic action which inscribes the category of youth with meanings of competence and knowledge will increase the likelihood that youth will be included in arenas of economic and political influence. By altering distributions of symbolic goods and by altering material realities as a consequence of altering meanings, poetic action remains political action despite the differences it shares with canonical conceptions of the latter.

This paper is in two parts: the first is a theoretical dialectic; the second is an analysis of case studies.

The section presenting the case studies was written first. In this second part of the paper, I present evidence of Israeli and Palestinian youth exercising the type of poetic agency for which this paper argues. The case studies are based upon fieldwork conducted in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the summer of 2010. In the field, I conducted in-depth interviews with Israeli and Palestinian youth. I participated in focus groups with these youth. I met with them at universities and at nongovernmental organizations. I visited with them in their homes. I spent time with them in refugee camps. My fieldwork was also observational. I observed walls and checkpoints, artwork

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3 A version of the case study analysis was submitted as a writing sample in the author’s graduate school applications in the fall of 2010.
and rap, and conditions of living and working. I noted how Israeli and Palestinian youth interact with and negotiate the spacial and symbolic architecture which surrounds them, manipulating it and being manipulated by it as they live out their lives.

Following the period of fieldwork, this paper’s inquiry was not whether political agency was exercised by Israeli and Palestinian youth, for it was evident agency was present and was being exercised by youth daily. Instead, the inquiry accepted the presence of youth agency as a given, and turned its attention onto the nature, onto the specific character, onto the methods of utilization, the sources of emergence, and the avenues of effect of this particular political agency—an agency which was not at all canonical or necessarily recognized as such, but yet one I observed in action again and again. The investigation, in short, became an inquiry into the nature of the agency I witnessed. This paper’s composition, then, is necessarily dialectic: traveling back and forth between a theory of political agency and empirical observation.

This paper’s first part consists of the theoretical work. In this part of the paper, I build the analytic tool with which the case studies are read, namely, poetic agency. The account of poetic agency presented here is built by synthesizing certain tenets of three theoretical systems. The most important of these systems is that of Hannah Arendt. Arendt’s account of action is the starting point for the theoretical dialectic. Arendtian action, I argue, is, of necessity, always political action. Taking a definition of political action from Arendt, the next move introduces James Scott’s account of everyday resistance, not so much as a corrective to Arendt, but rather as an illuminating addition, for the two systems are, in the main, not contradictory. From Scott, we take the suggestion that Arendtian action will most often assume an everyday form, i.e., most
manifestations of Arendtian action are not to be found in occasional, extraordinary events, but rather in quotidian acts which often go overlooked. Finally, in the work of Michel Foucault, we find a kind of “microphysics” which is able to explain in detail much of “the how” and “the why” of the preceding theory. Through his theories of power and discourse, Foucault is able to explain explicitly how it is that meanings are political, how it is that actors access the symbolic world, what the characteristics of this symbolic world are, and how it is that operating within it both limits and makes possible political action. Finally, through his thought on the care for the self, Foucault provides an additional function poetic agency might fulfill, namely, not merely the revelation of the actor we find in Arendt, but rather the very constitution of the actor through practices of discursively circumscribed self invention.

The three theoretical systems put to work here were selected because of their correspondence to the case studies in the paper's second part. Their appropriateness emerged from the power they possess to explain the agency I locate in Israeli and Palestinian youth. In isolation, each of the three theoretical systems is incapable of doing the degree of interpretative work that is possible through their conjunction. The analytic tool which emerges from their synthesis, poetic agency, is, I hope, able to unpack a bit of the complexity contained within the political actions of Israeli and Palestinian youth.
The Research Problem

Youth agency has been articulated by researchers both in general and in the specific context of Israel-Palestine. In this respect, this paper's insight is not so much that Israeli and Palestinian youth exercise political agency as it is that Israeli and Palestinian youth exercise a particular kind of political agency. Nonetheless, before beginning the theoretical and empirical analyses of that agency—poetic agency—it is worth pausing to pose the research problem with a greater shade of detail. Here, I present examples of how youth agency has been theorized in general and how it has been theorized in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Finally, I provide a small sample of case study evidence. I take up these matters at the outset in order that the questions they introduce about political agency might arise in antecedence to the theoretical dialectic.

One area of research in which youth agency has received sustained attention is in the field of peace and conflict studies. One of main reasons for this attention has been the phenomenon of child soldiering. The child soldier, as, among many things, a wielder of violence and terror, appears to be a clear demonstration of the possibility for youth agency. While it is the case that child soldiers are often coerced into action, this does not necessarily deprive child soldiers of the agency they seem to wield. Rather, it suggests only that outside forces have pressured them to use their agency toward certain ends. The type of political agency the child soldier exercises in violence, however, is markedly different from the type of political agency this paper locates among certain Israeli and Palestinian youth. Whereas the latter type is characterized by creative, symbolic
transmission, the former is characterized by material destruction and terror. Given this
difference, the work of Siobhan McEvoy-Levy provides an account of youth agency
more fit for this paper than the account arising from the case of the child soldier. For
McEvoy-Levy, youth in contexts of armed conflict exercise many kinds of political
agency, one of which departs drastically from the agency discursively associated with the
icon of the child soldier, namely youth agency for peacebuilding.\(^4\) In her work, McEvoy-
Levy has focused on those instances of youth agency which she identifies as agency for
resolving violence and building peace. Though giving deference to the narratives of
youth themselves rather than protracted theorizing, McEvoy-Levy does, at times, offer
explicit explanations of the sources, mechanisms of deployment, and conditions of
actualization of a certain kind of youth agency utilized for peacebuilding:

Youth, particularly children, are passive agents of conflict reproduction.
... But youth are also active agents of conflict reproduction when they are
participants in armed conflict and when they act as transmitters of
knowledge and creators of meaning and culture. No other group in society
simultaneously interacts with school, home, the street, the workforce,
cultural or social institutions like the church or voluntary and leisure
organizations, and the military in the way youth do. ... [Youth] create a
variety of narratives that are transmitted to peers, to younger siblings, and
also to adults. (2006: 284)

\(^4\) I use the language “discursively associated” and “icon” here to indicate the contingent, power-dependent
nature of the child soldier image in the Western imaginary. Child soldiers are, in fact, children too, as it
were, in some cases, for instance, building communities of care amongst themselves in violent conditions
(Singer 2006).
For McEvoy-Levy, youth agency for peacebuilding is primarily a symbolic agency involving the manipulation and the creation of meaning. Because it obtains under conditions of interaction with a number of institutions and actors, youth agency is able to transmit meanings across multiple sites, thereby heightening the efficacy of youth’s symbolic actions. Youth agency, as articulated by McEvoy-Levy, shares much in common with the poetic agency this paper ascribes to Israeli and Palestinian youth, especially in its emphasis on the making of meaning. Furthermore, McEvoy-Levy’s work, to the extent it focuses on the economic and political marginalization of youth, also does considerable work for explaining why it might be that so many youth, especially those abstaining from violence, must turn to poetic agency as an outlet for political expression. Accepting McEvoy-Levy’s main tenet—that youth’s political agency is often symbolic in character—poetic agency, in the main, does not oppose but rather complements her system. Digging deep into theory, poetic agency excavates in detail micro-physics through which symbolic agency operates, and it adds a number of new emphases and mechanisms to the account of youth agency McEvoy-Levy presents.

While youth agency, as a universal phenomenon, has received attention in peace and conflict studies, attention has also been given to the subject in the specific context of Israel-Palestine. As in the case of the child soldier, much of this analysis has been focused on cases of overt violence, most notably martyrdom operations (see for example Abufarha 2009; Hasso 2002). However, attention has also been given to political agency which aligns more closely with poetic agency. Especially notable here is the work of Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian who has written extensively on the political action of Palestinian women, especially young Palestinian women:
My specific focus on young women is important for the obvious reason that these women are the future of Palestine, but also for the less obvious reason of examining the ways in which the quotidian and colonial conflation of state/family/woman/property is being disrupted by the younger generation, for such disruptions are occurring. These young women are fighting with determination to survive and are valiantly attempting to change the norms. … Young women are refusing to accept roadblocks that prevent them from reaching schools; refusing home imprisonment; refusing early marriage as a means of surviving economic hardship or social insecurity. They are creating new ways to play, cope, share, walk, live. (2009: 70-71)

For Shalhoub-Kevorkian, young Palestinian women are exercising agency that is characterized by an everyday nature. Quotidian acts such as going to school and refusing marriage are taken as politicized forms of “disruption” against military occupation and Palestinian patriarchy. In addition to noting the everyday nature of political agency for young Palestinian women, Shalhoub-Kevorkian holds that “agency is inherently situational,” that it will take different forms at different places and times, and that therefore analysts should be suspicious of universalizing, imperialist accounts of what ought to count as political action (2009: 50-54). “The contribution of women frontliners to resistance,” she writes, “is usually invisible to outsiders and for the most part goes unnoticed, but it exhibits a great deal of power and resilience” (2009: 1). When judged against political actions as conceived in the West, e.g., mass demonstrations or terrorism, Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s examples of “frontline resistance” are radical departures:
Being a frontliner means being in a place of constant combat—both material and psychological—that enervates all the energies that one has to resist, yet these women continue not just to resist but also to re-create. … The frontliner can be a woman who is lining up or is humiliated at a checkpoint, a woman singing her children to sleep in the middle of night raids and incursions, one selling yogurt to make some additional money and buy food for her children, a woman giving birth at a checkpoint because she has been prevented from reaching a hospital, or one screaming and crying in court while refusing to accept the law’s failure to protect her rights, and more. (2009: 34)

Although it might be tempting to agree with Shalhoub-Kevorkian that each of these cases is indeed an instance of resistance, disruption, or political action, we must first, I think, inquire as to why it is this might be so. If a woman selling yogurt is exercising political agency, what is it about that particular act that makes it political and what is the nature of the agency which is being exercised? If going to school and singing lullabies are political actions, are they always so, or only in certain cases? What distinguishes the certain cases? If such a wide variety of everyday acts qualify as political action, does the category retain any meaning or utility? And how are we to conceptually accommodate within the category of political action both the likes of giving birth at a military checkpoint and pulling a lever for the electoral candidate of one’s preference? While, in the end, a theory of poetic agency will agree with Shalhoub-Kevorkian in recognizing the political agency of school goers and yogurt sellers, its development through theoretical dialectic will allow us to defend Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s claims from a position of conceptual clarity. In
the process, we will answer why it is that certain everyday, invisible, and symbolic actions ought be considered political. We will arrive at an account of poetic agency which will reveal not only the possibilities of political agency for young Palestinian women and youth in general, but also the possibilities of political agency for the members of any marginalized group, no matter how asymmetrical the relations of domination.

From these accounts of youth agency, our research problem emerges. To make it more salient still, I have included Figure 1 here at the outset. Taken in Bethlehem’s Dheisheh refugee camp, the photograph is of a collage of young handprints shaped to form a Palestinian flag. The image, together with its inscriptions, “we’ll make our history,” “free Palestine,” and “children of Dheisheh,” could elicit any number of readings. If considering whether the creation of this mural should be classified an act of political agency, we might reasonably ask a number of questions: What were the intentions of the actors? What have been the consequences of the mural’s creation? Do either those who made this piece or those who interpret it view it as a political entity? In this case, the answers to these questions are largely unknown. Poetic agency, for its part, can do nothing to answer them. However, poetic agency does give us something else, namely a criterion by which we could decide whether this act ought to count as political action if
we were to find answers to our questions. Furthermore, an account of poetic agency will tell us what questions we ought to ask in the first place if with what we are concerned is making such a judgement. For its ability to analyze in-depth the political character of aesthetic works such as the piece in Figure 1, a theory of poetic agency is especially appropriate for application to the context of Israel-Palestine, for within this physical and symbolic space visual, spoken, and lived aesthetics pervade.\(^5\)

\[^5\text{The focus on formal aesthetics in this particular example is not meant to suggest that poetic agency is necessarily concerned with the production of formal artwork. While poetic agency can certainly manifest itself in the creation of works of art, in need always do so. Material aesthetics receive attention here and elsewhere because they are often relatively easy for the researcher to pinpoint and analyze. However, other creations and manipulations of meaning—even those never given explicit artistic or physical representation—can also qualify as acts of poetic agency. For example, manipulations of discourses of youth (described below) will often occur without directly correlative physical manifestations.}\]
A Theory of Poetic Agency

The political theory of Hannah Arendt provides a foundation upon which a theory of poetic agency can be constructed. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt offers a detailed philosophy of political action and political agency. It is adopted here for its explanatory power, i.e., for its ability to give a cogent interpretation of the empirical observations presented in the paper’s second part. Arendt’s system is also adopted here due to its suitability for synthesis with the theoretical systems that follow. Poetic agency is not, in the main, a system of corrections to Arendt; rather, it is mostly a system of additions and reconsiderations, a unique completion of an unfinished frame. It is from Arendt’s philosophy that the theory of poetic agency takes its central tenets. What is political action? Who is a political agent? Under what conditions is agency exercised? The remainder of this section addresses these questions through exposition and interpretation of Arendt’s philosophy. Following Arendt, I argue that every instance of action is necessarily political action. Furthermore, action is necessarily creative and symbolic, for action always makes meaning and reveals the identity of its agent. It is from its interventions in systems of meaning—especially those systems of meaning concerning personal identity—that action derives its political character.

Arendt devotes most of *The Human Condition* to theorizing what she identifies as the three central activities of human life, what she calls the *vita activa*: labor, work, and action. Each of the *vita activa* corresponds to a fundamental condition of human

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6 My reading of Arendt has been aided by consultation of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, specifically the entry “Hannah Arendt” (d’Entreves 2006).
existence: life, worldliness, and plurality. Labor, corresponding to life, consists of those activities which sustain life, for example, eating, drinking, and procreating. Work, corresponding to worldliness, consists of activities which maintain the habitability the world, for example, building tools, constructing homes, and so forth. Action, corresponding to the condition of plurality, is the most complex of the \textit{vita activa}. It is in her account of action that Arendt offers a theory of political action and political agency.

For Arendt, action is grounded in the condition of plurality. The condition of plurality is characterized by two features: equality and distinctness. "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (1958: 8). Plurality refers first to the fact that all humans share in common the condition of being human. Hence, plurality refers to equality. Second, plurality refers to the fact that all humans are unique. No two individuals will be alike in every respect, in virtue of differences in time, space, and circumstance. Hence, plurality refers to distinctness. These two characteristics of plurality are important for Arendt, for it is through them that political action and political agency can emerge.

Political action and political agency would be impossible if it were not for distinctness. For Arendt, each individual enters the world as a person unlike anyone other. Every individual is unique, and it is because of this uniqueness that human action is possible. There is a "new beginning inherent in birth" (1958: 9), and it is in virtue of this new beginning that human agency can occur:

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon
ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. ... Its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. ... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man in unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. (1958: 177-178)

Arendt calls this process of beginning “natality.” Natality refers not only to the beginning of a new individual at birth, but also to the process by which an individual initiates new beginnings after birth.\(^7\) For Arendt, action is defined as the realization of this process, as the “actualization of the human condition of natality” (1958: 178). Action takes place when an individual exercises the capacity of natality, when an individual begins something new or creates a reality. Action does this by asserting distinctness, and in so doing action brings into being something which did not exist before. For Arendt, the exercise of natality through action is nothing less than freedom itself (1958: 177).

Provisionally, then, action can be defined as the actualization of freedom, as the act through which natality is exercised by the individual. Consequently, agency, which is nothing other than the potential to exercise action, obtains in every individual with the ability to actualize freedom. Because this requires nothing other than the exercise of natality, every human person possesses the potential of Arendtian agency, so far defined,

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\(^7\) While procreation falls under the condition of labor, natality is bound up with the condition of action. What might be taken as a contradiction—that the act of birth seems to belong to two categories—should rather, I think, be taken as a connection suggesting that the act of birth is necessary for both sustaining life and for making life worth living, i.e., for both the reproduction of human beings and for the reproduction of human freedom.
for natality obtains through distinctness, a quality in which every human person participates.

If action and agency arise from distinctness, their political character, i.e., that which makes action political action and agency political agency, arises from equality. Equality, as a characteristic of plurality, refers to the fact that all individuals share the quality of being human (1958: 8). Equality also refers to the fact that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (1958: 7). Equality, then, means not only that there is a shared human condition, but also that this shared human condition is participated in by a plural number of individuals. In other words, living in a world which is lived in by others constitutes an essential characteristic of the condition of plurality. It is this aspect of plurality which allows action to take on its political character. Action, because it necessarily occurs under conditions of plurality, is always interpersonal and communicative:

Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act. Action and speech need the surrounding presence of others no less than fabrication needs the surrounding presence of nature for its material, and of a world in which to place the finished product. Fabrication is surrounded by and in constant contact with the world: action and speech are surrounded by and in constant contact with the web of acts and the words of other men. (1958: 188)

Action is necessarily interpersonal. Just as fabrication—the manipulation of the physical world in the activity of work—must obtain within a physical world which can be shaped
and reshaped, so must action obtain within a symbolic world which can be manipulated. The presence of others is required if action is to take on significance. Action is "relevant only through the spoken word," for it is through the spoken word that an one "identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do" (1958: 179). The assertion of distinctness which actualizes natality cannot occur in the absence of an audience to whom distinctness can be asserted. For Arendt, *action must be symbolic or it is not action at all* (1958: 178-179). Arendtian action, then, has the following necessary conditions thus far: the actualization of natality and the making of meaning. As the basis of distinctness and *the plurality*, it is the human condition of plurality that allows both of these conditions to be realized.

The political character of action is bound up with its symbolic quality. For Arendt, "speech is what makes man a political being" (1958: 3). It is through a particular form of speech that action is politicized, one which Arendt calls the "disclosure of the 'who'" (1958: 179).

For Arendt, it is only through action, not through labor or work, that individuals can meaningfully assert their distinctness. While labor and work might reveal the "what" of an individual, for example, "his qualities, gifts, and talents," they cannot reveal the "who" (1958: 179). The disclosure of the "who" takes place only in action. "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (1958: 179). It is through the revelation of an individual's "unique personal identity" that the "who" is disclosed. This is a process of action, for in it natality is actualized and meaning is transmitted. The disclosure of the "who" is in every case a political action:
The disclosure of the “who” through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together, they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. (1958: 184)

The disclosure of the “who” is necessarily political because it carries “immediate consequences” which impact the lives others. An assertion of distinctness always involves the advancement of a claim. Because it is an attempt at manipulating the distribution of resources in the symbolic world, every disclosure of the “who” is a political action. Furthermore, for Arendt, every action must be a disclosure of the “who”: “Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others” (1958: 180). If every action is a disclosure of the “who,” and if every disclosure of the “who” is a political action, then not only is it the case that every action is a disclosure of the “who,” but also that every Arendtian action is a political action. Three conditions, then, are necessary for Arendtian action: actualization of natality, making of meaning, and disclosure of the “who.” Each of these is grounded in the human condition of plurality.

A final feature of action is its ability to actualize, through power, the “space of appearance.” The space of appearance is a political space, but one entirely immaterial. It is a space for deliberation and creation, and it is immediately dissolved if these activities cease. The space of appearance is brought into being whenever individuals gather together and participate collectively in a particular form of action, namely power.
Arendtian power exists only in actualization. It disappears immediately when individuals cease to participate in action together, even if the individuals remain physically gathered. It is through a particular type of collective action that power comes to be:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. (1958: 200)

Power is a creative, non-coercive force. It shares meaning, builds relationships, and sets into motion processes of beginning. Power is a constructive force. It is antithetical to violence. Although “violence can destroy power, it can never become a substitute for it” (1958: 202). The actualization of power brings into being the space of appearance.

Located within this space is the performance of “organized remembrance,” collective inscription of meaning onto the conditions, events, and inhabitants of the world (1958: 198). It is within the space of appearance that human community is built and sustained. Here is a space in which “I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” (1958: 198-199). Brought into being by constructive, collective action, i.e., by power, the space of appearance is a symbolic, interpersonal, political space through which individuals make meanings, build relationships, and create new realities.

The political theory of Arendt offers an account of political action and political agency. In doing so, it provides a foundation upon which an account of poetic agency can be built. Arendtian action is that which actualizes natality, transmits meaning, and discloses
the "who." Put another way, Arendtian action is characterized by creative, symbolic acts which assert the unique identity of an actor. For Arendt, action is, of necessity, always political action. Political agency inheres in anyone with the potential to exercise political action. In virtue of the human condition of plurality, all human persons are political agents. Occasionally, individuals, by collectively exercising constructive action, actualize power and the space of appearance. Through this space, human persons build relationships, make meaning, and initiate new processes of beginning.

Arendt’s theories of political action and political agency can accommodate traditional impressions of the political. The creative, symbolic, and revelatory character of Arendtian action is present, at least in part, in democratic elections, social movements, deliberative democracy, and so forth. Even certain acts of "political violence"—although not actualizations of power—might be taken as Arendtian actions in so far as such acts initiate beginnings, convey meanings, and assert identities.8 Arendt’s system, then, can explain the political nature of acts traditionally considered political. However, the acts presented in this paper’s second part—acts of Israeli and Palestinian youth—might not readily be regarded as political actions proper within the tradition. Elections, social

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8 Note on terminology: “Arendtian action” refers to the account of action developed in the preceding section. It has three necessary conditions and the possibility of actualizing Arendtian power. "Political action," while used synonymously with "Arendtian action" in the previous section, is, for the remainder of this paper’s first part, at times a substitute concept which will undergo sustained development, i.e., "political action" can substitute for "poetic action" as the latter is thus far developed in a certain period of the paper. At other times, "political action" is used as a generic concept—as a term used to mark instances of action commonly believed to be political, but which are perhaps not political in the stricter senses we are considering here. "Action," used by itself, refers to this generic usage. "Act" and "acts" are reserved exclusively for phenomena which are decidedly not political actions or which might be political actions. In the latter case, we are typically trying to ascertain if an "act" is in fact a political action.
movements, acts of terrorism, and the like, share in common a certain set of characteristics. They involve and impact many individuals. They do not happen often but only on rare occasions: their occurrences are periodic, historic, or horrific. Moreover, these political actions are recognized as political. They are bestowed the designation by commentators, specialists, and human communities. However, the acts of Israeli and Palestinian youth, at least those presented below, do not share this set of characteristics. They do not happen on rare occasions, but with regularity. Furthermore, the political nature of these acts is often unrecognized and denied. To make the case that these acts are nonetheless political actions, the work of James Scott is introduced here as an addition to the Arendtian system developed thus far. The synthesis, drawing upon Scott's account of "everyday resistance," begins our dialectic, adding to our nascent theory of poetic agency considerable power for explaining acts such as those of Israeli and Palestinian youth.

It is in contrast to highly organized political actions that everyday resistance is theorized by Scott. Noting that revolutions and mass movements have taken the fore for analysts, Scott observes that most political action is not nearly so organized or collective in character. The familiarity of the middle class with organized politics, the appeal of explosive events, and the availability of information to researchers—factors such as these have caused actions to be taken as political only if they are massive, revolutionary, or easily pinpointed (1985: xv-xvi). However, such a conception of political action in fact overlooks the majority of the phenomenon, not recognizing small, individual, and everyday occurrences of political action. Scott, who is concerned specifically with that type of political action known as "resistance," writes the following of its quotidian manifestations, those which he calls "everyday forms of resistance":

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Most forms of this struggle stop well short of outright collective defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on. ... They require little or no coordination and planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority. ... Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of peasant insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own. (1985: xvi-xvii)

Everyday forms of resistance are undertaken by individuals and small groups, not mass movements. Typically, they are deployed by members of marginalized groups. Everyday resistance is characterized by being spontaneous and organic. It is initiated by resisters themselves, and spreads between them through shared understandings. Acts of everyday resistance are not necessarily "enlightened" or "principled": they include the likes of theft and violence, and it is often through the pursuit of self-interest that resistance is undertaken. Notably, these acts do not usually challenge their opposition directly, but in secret and deceit. Although relatively marginal in isolation, acts of everyday resistance form substantial political and economic forces through amalgamation and through inspiration of further resistance.

The context from which Scott theorizes colors his account in particular ways. His examples of everyday resistance—foot dragging, pilfering, and the like—are based upon
his observations of peasants in a Malaysian village. The particular forms of everyday resistance exercised by these peasants are functions of the unique relations of subordination they experience with landowners. Thus, while the general tenets of Scott's account of everyday resistance (for example, its everyday character, its lack of coordination) might be easily translatable to other contexts, the particular examples he provides might not be replicated elsewhere. Everyday resistance will take different forms depending on context and upon particular relations of power. That this is the case will be illustrated by the case studies of Israeli and Palestinian youth. However, a correction to Scott's theory is suggested already in the work of Arendt.

For Scott, everyday resistance is characterized by seeking immediate, material ends. It does not typically advance its claims in symbolic space: "Where everyday resistance most strikingly departs from other forms of resistance is in its implicit disavowal of public and symbolic goals" (1985: 33). This theoretical tenet is in line with Scott's contention that everyday resistance is typically clandestine, subverting in secret so as not to provoke a response from concentrated power. Unlike other general features of Scott's theory of resistance—for instance, his insistence that it can emerge through everyday actions—this strand of the theory seems heavily dependent on the Malaysian context. If peasants avoid "direct, symbolic confrontation" with Malaysian landlords, it is because this mode of interaction obtains in virtue of the circumstance's particular power relations, not because this mode of interaction inheres in everyday resistance. Following Arendt, all political action is necessarily symbolic. And although Scott might claim that in the case of the Malaysian peasants the symbolism is limited to symbolic transmission among the peasantry through "implicit understandings and informal networks," he would
have to concede that given a different system of power relations there is no reason why everyday resistance might not take on a thoroughly symbolic character. If there was no threat of response, if there was a guarantee of free speech, if a system of repression was confident in its strength and did not desire to undertake new repressions which might shatter its stability—in these cases *symbolic everyday resistance* would not merely be possible but perhaps be the dominant form everyday resistance would assume. While the efficacy of symbolic political action will be addressed in the paper’s next part, it is here important to note only that symbolic political action and everyday political action are by no means incompatible. Indeed, as I will argue, it is, in the main, through manipulation of the symbolic world that everyday political action is exercised by Israeli and Palestinian youth. It is through nothing other than the symbolic transmission Arendt identifies in all political action that the “implicit understandings and informal networks” Scott describes can arise at all. The “political and economic barrier reefs” formed by everyday resistance could not come into being except through a space of appearance in which individual “anthozoan polyps” unite in collective, constructive action. As Scott himself observes, there are no “unmoved movers” in everyday resistance, for thoughts of resistance circulate across consciousnesses in dynamic with a changing material world (1958: 38). In short, while Arendt demonstrates that everyday resistance is necessarily bound up with the making of meaning, Scott, through his own account, reveals a mode of practices through which political action, and consequently meaning making, can be exercised daily.

Another point on which Arendt and Scott can productively encounter is on the issue of intention. In conceptualizing resistance, one of the more difficult questions with
which Scott is concerned is whether resistance needs to be intentional in order to be resistance. Here, two issues are at stake. First, does an intention need to be of a certain kind if the action it corresponds to is to be considered resistance? Second, is it possible that an act might be one of resistance even if there is no intention behind it at all?

On the first of these questions, Arendt and Scott offer similar answers. For Scott, acts of everyday resistance “often represent a form of individual self-help” (1985: xvi). Everyday resistance is exercised because it simultaneously benefits the wellbeing of the resister and contributes toward the ultimate deconstruction of the repressive system. The peasant who steals from his landlord, for instance, not only increases the capital with which food and supplies can be purchased immediately, but also increases, albeit incrementally, the resources the peasantry has to sustain itself in its struggle against the land owners. For Scott, “it is precisely the fusion of self-interest and resistance that is the vital force animating the resistance of peasants and proletarians” (1985: 295). On this point, Arendt agrees: “most words and deeds are about some worldly reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent” (1958: 182). Arendtian action, then, like everyday resistance, does its work on two levels. It is through the first level, i.e., through self-interested manipulations of the world, that actors exert themselves on the second level, the space of disclosure. Of course, there is nothing to prevent an individual from disclosure which is not self-interested, just as there is nothing to prevent acts of everyday resistance which come at the expense of a resister. Assertions of difference in a hostile environment, for example, or acts of everyday resistance undertaken against one’s own privileged class, for instance, demonstrate that the norms argued for by Arendt and Scott are just that—standards which can be departed from.
A second question of intention, more difficult than the first, is whether intention must be present at all in order for an act to qualify as an act of resistance. And though I have delayed raising it, a similar question is important for Arendt, namely the following: Can action be exercised in the absence of intention?

For Scott, intention seems to be a necessary condition for resistance. Granted, he does not set the bar very high. As noted above, Scott argues that an intention can be both self-interested and resistant. However, because Scott does not wish to tie the consequences of an act to its status as resistance (1985: 294-295), it would seem that an act of resistance cannot be purely self-interested. If consequences do not determine resistance, then the necessary condition for resistance must be some kind of intention. For Scott, this intention can be so faint as to be almost completely unconscious: “their intentions may be so embedded in the peasant subculture and in the routine, taken-for-granted struggle to provide for the subsistence and survival of the household as to remain inarticulate. The fish do not talk about the water” (1985: 301). In virtue of nothing more than being forced to navigate a common repressive condition, a resistant intention can be actualized. Participation in a “climate of opinion” is sufficient intention for resistance (1985: 300).9 As I will argue, it is precisely this kind of intention—one that is “routine,” “taken-for granted,” and saturated into the culture—that is often behind the political action of Palestinian youth.

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9 Scott’s claim that intention can arise from a “climate of opinion” gives rise to a further question regarding intention, namely, What is the space in which intention obtains? In theory of mind, intention has traditionally been located within the mind of an individual. If Scott is taken as suggesting that in a “climate of opinion” intention arises in a sort of collective mind, then his argument seems dubious. However, a more generous reading could take Scott as suggesting that systems of interpersonal meaning (“climates of opinion”) systemically plant intentions of a subtle sort in the minds of individuals within subordinate groups. On this more plausible reading, Scott’s argument seems coherent.
Whereas Scott argues that intention is necessary for resistance, Arendt suggests intention is *not* necessary for action. As noted, Arendt believes that intention can be mixed with self-interest in the exercise of disclosure. However, Arendt also maintains that in most cases, actors are entirely incapable of disclosing the "who" intentionally:

The disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says or does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this "who" in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the "who," which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself...always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters. (1958: 179-180)

Disclosing the "who," then, is almost never an intentional process. Individuals rarely succeed in grasping their unique identities, and thus they cannot easily intend the circumstances of disclosure. For Arendt, the inability to recognize one's own distinctness arises from the condition of plurality and from the unpredictability of action. No one is ever "the author or producer of his own life story" (1958: 184), for all individuals exist within a plurality where "every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of a new process (1958: 190). The unique identity of the actor is itself in flux, and so it can rarely be captured for intentional disclosure. For similar reasons, i.e., the condition of plurality, neither the actualization of natality nor the making
of meaning require intention for their exercise. In virtue of living among others, individuals can set into motion processes of beginning and transmit meaning without ever intending to do so. Political action, then, can be exercised unintentionally.  

The break which occurs between action and resistance along lines of intention indicates that the terms are not synonymous. Although all resistance is political action, not all political action is resistance. Resistance is actualized under a stricter set of requirements. First, the intention to resist must accompany the fulfillment of all three of the necessary conditions for political action. Following Scott, the intention to resist may be so faint as to be barely perceptible, but it must be present nonetheless in the case of resistance. Second, resistance must possess an adversarial quality which is exerted from below: “only those survival strategies that deny or mitigate claims from appropriating classes can be called resistance” (1985: 302). Conversely, political action, as when it is exercised in the actualization of Arendtian power, need be neither adversarial nor vertical. Scott’s system, then, equips us not only with the category of the “everyday,” but also with a concept of resistance that is distinct from political action.

Scott’s theory of everyday resistance adds a particular emphasis to the Arendtian account of action. It encourages us to look for political action not in occasional, highly organized acts, but rather in quotidian, often invisible practices. It reclaims as political the everyday activities of marginalized groups. Building toward a theory of poetic agency, Scott adds to the Arendtian conditions of political action the admonition to look for such action in overlooked places. Through dialectic with Arendt, Scott brings to the fore tenets and

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10 This is not to say that all forms of political action can be exercised unintentionally. For example, power, which is actualized when individuals exercise action collectively, constructively, and non-coercively, would seem very difficult to actualize without intention.
tensions which went previously unaddressed. Intention is not necessarily involved in political action, though it must exist on some level in the case of resistance. In political action, as in resistance, when intentions are present they need not be enlightened—intentions can be both self-interested and resistant. The consequences of acts matter little for either political action or resistance. Where political action and resistance diverge is on the issue of intention and on the necessarily subversive character of resistance. While the concept of resistance provides us with an interesting analytic tool, it is the category of the everyday that makes the main contribution to our account of poetic agency. Having added an everyday character to Arendtian action, a theory of poetic agency can begin to grapple with the politics of the yogurt seller, the graffiti artist, or the checkpoint negotiator. But before poetic agency can do its full measure of explanatory work, consideration of yet another theoretical system is necessary.

Political action is characterized by creative, symbolic acts which assert the unique identities of human actors. This Arendtian account of action, brought into encounter with Scott, locates political actions, in the main, not in organized, occasional, and recognizably political events, but rather in everyday, often invisible acts. This synthesized theory of action gives particular attention to the quotidian activities of marginalized groups—peasants, workers, youth, and so forth. Following Arendt, though relatively powerless, the members of such groups remain political agents, for they retain the power to creatively assert their distinctness through the making of meaning in virtue.
of their participation in plurality. Developed thus far, this account of poetic agency carries considerable explanatory power for interpreting practices such as those presented in this paper's second part. However, in certain lengths, the strokes sketched above remain overly broad. Compared to Scott's examples of material resistance, in which the efficacy of the acts is immediately perceptible, actions which are primarily symbolic are more ambiguous in their causalities, deployments, mechanisms, and modes of impact. How do actors access and craft spaces of meaning? What are the characteristics of symbolic space? What are the avenues through which newly made meaning slides into preexisting webs and networks? What are the relations between the symbolic and the material and what makes this nexus political? The work of Michel Foucault goes some way toward answering these questions. Through his theories of discourse and power, Foucault maps the characteristics of the symbolic world and demonstrates its relevance as a political space.

In Foucault, the symbolic world can be understood in terms of discourse and power. Discourse refers both to the systems of meaning which exist within, are created by, and influence human experience and to the practices and rules which regulate the formation and emergence of these systems of meaning. Discourse, Foucault writes, can be treated "sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements" (1972a: 80). As the general domain of all statements, discourse refers to the totality of propositions expressed as statements by human actors. More important for Foucault are the latter two usages of discourse. As an individualizable group of statements, discourse refers to systems of meaning which have formed around
particular categories, persons, institutions, events, and so forth: for example, discourses surrounding science, sexuality, disease, age, race, gender, class, and the like. These groupings of discourse, what Foucault calls "discursive formations," inscribe symbolic characteristics onto phenomena which do not necessarily inhere in the phenomena themselves. There is nothing about youth, for instance, which dictates association with threat, incompetence, and helplessness. While Foucault would not deny a certain material condition of youth, that it possesses a certain ontology independent of inscription and interpretation, he would insist that the systems of meaning which circulate around youth are only discursive formations—contingent, symbolic creations of human origin. The third usage of discourse, referring to "a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements," references, in short, the rules and practices which govern the emergence and suppression of statements and their admission into or exclusion from discursive formations. Discourse as regulation determines the content of statements and their systems of relation: the ways in which certain forces, actors, and procedures attempt to create, to refashion, and to project meanings; the positions of statements within hierarchies of "truth" and "scientificity"; the contests wherein statements are inscribed onto certain individuals and institutions. In sum, discourse, as discursive formations, influences how individuals interact with and perceive the world, its objects, themselves, and others. And discourse, as that which regulates discursive formations, governs the shapes and specific characters these influences assume. Through this Foucauldian account of discourse, properties of the symbolic world begin to emerge. Most important here are its connections to power, politics, and political action.
For Foucault, discourse is inextricably bound up with power. And power, like discourse, is a subject with which Foucault is deeply concerned. In much of his early and middle work, Foucault is occupied primarily with tracing the evolutions of power: from sovereign power, which is exercised violently from above, to disciplinary power, which is enforced through the panoptic gaze, to pastoral power, in which individuals are made to police themselves, such as in the Christian practice of confession (1977; 1982). For Foucault, power is everywhere, functioning in the "form of a chain" and exercised "through a net-like organization" (1972b: 98). Power is interpersonal: "in human relations, whatever they are...power is always present" (1984: 11). Importantly, power is not only repressive, but also productive (1972b). Power is not necessarily a negative force. Often it is desirable, e.g., in a romantic relationship (1984). It is used not only for control, but also for liberation and resistance:

One must observe also that there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. If one or the other were completely at the disposition of the other and became his thing, an object on which he can exercise an infinite and unlimited violence, there would not be relations of power. In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty. ... That means that in relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance—of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation—there would be no relations of power. (1984: 12)

Even in the most asymmetrical power distribution, what Foucault calls "domination," the relational character of power guarantees the possibility of resistance. This itself—the
relational character of power, its necessary inherence in both the repressors and the repressed—goes some way toward explaining the political agency of marginalized groups such as peasants and youth. Foucault, however, can offer greater explanation still, namely through the aforementioned connection he makes between power and discourse.

Discourse always exists in relation to power. Sets of statements, i.e., discursive formations, take on degrees of legitimacy, circulation, popularity, recognition, truth, and so forth, as mediated by their relations to institutions and networks of power. The scientific establishment, for instance, is able to bestow greater and lesser degrees of scientificity onto statements, influencing how they will be received and circulated by large numbers of people (1972b). The nexus of power and discourse is always political, for discourse impacts how individuals perceive and operate within the world. Here, Foucault’s most sustained example addresses discourses of madness, discourses which he reveals to be historically contingent and tied to power (1972b). As an object of discourse, madness in the West came to be associated with pathology and danger to society. Consequently, the mad were confined to asylums. In this case, the manipulation of discourse by the scientific and medical establishments—acting as what Foucault calls “authorities of delimitation”—had material, harmful effects for a social group. It is in this way that discourse, and meaning generally, is always political. Manipulations of the symbolic world invariably impact distributions of mental and material wellbeing: “In the end, we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power” (1972b: 94). Here, then, in the connections between discourse, power, and the individual, emerges an explanation of the efficacy of symbolic
political action. Individuals, who always exist within relations of power, who, consequently, are always able to resist, can, incrementally, reshape discourses and thereby material realities, accessing the symbolic world through the power of which discourse and they themselves are constituted. By reshaping discourses of themselves and their social groups, members of marginalized groups can influence how they are perceived and what they receive. This trajectory, then, offers an explanation for why Arendtian political action is political, for it demonstrates avenues by which actors can impact politics through creative, symbolic, and revelatory acts. Moreover, Foucault’s account, by associating power with both discourse and individuals, explains how it is actors can access and manipulate the symbolic world, namely, through the channels of power in which both meaning and actor exist.

This reading of Foucault must be defended against a certain interpretation of his work. Especially in consideration of his early writings, it is often alleged that Foucault’s system allows little room for individual agency. Discourse, critics allege, is a totalizing force which constitutes the individual entirely. There is no room left for political agency to assert itself. After all, Foucault himself argues that individuals never exist outside of preexisting relations of power. In short, agency cannot be reconciled with Foucauldian discourse.

This interpretation of Foucault falls short on account of its misunderstanding of discourse. As noted above, while Foucault certainly holds that individuals always exist within discursive power relations, this does not mean that individuals are deprived of meaningful political agency. The power relations in which individuals are enmeshed can be harnessed by political agents, bent toward their own ambitions and ends: “there can be
no relations of power unless the subjects are free” (1984: 12). Foucault clearly objects to the notion of the “transcendental subject” (1972a; 1972b), i.e., a subject able to form and exert his or her will totally independent of all discursive influences. However, locating the subject within a discursive field does not deprive him or her of political agency; it merely asserts that his or her political agency will be colored by the discourses circulating within a particular space and time. Beyond its mere coloring of agency, it might be claimed that the discursive field, by being the context in which individuals operate, is in fact that which makes agency possible. In a sense, this claim would seem to be not too far from that advanced by Arendt, namely, that it is because of the condition of plurality that human beings can exercise action. Discourse, similarly, should not be understood as something which prevents the emergence of human agency, but rather as something which makes the emergence of human agency possible. Discursive fields color the particular characteristics certain agencies will assume, but they do not totalize individuals in their entirety. Rather, discursive fields provide the mediums of operation necessary for political action. Foucault’s accommodation of political agency, then, is in fact demonstrated through his theory of discourse.

A second argument for Foucauldian agency is particularly relevant to the account of poetic agency being developed here. This second argument arises from Foucault’s writing on what he calls an “ethic of care for the self” (1984). For Foucault, individual ethics in classical Greece and Rome was characterized by concern for bettering the self. This ethic of caring for the self contrasts to later Christian ethics in which the individual is no longer concerned foremost with constructing, through his or her own understanding and preferences, an admirable self, but rather with adhering to an imposed system of
Christian doctrine. Caring for the self is characterized by introspection and by mastering and improving one's mind, body, desires, and reputation. Unlike Christian ethics, in which the individual aligns dogmatically with a standard which is not of his or her own design, the ethic of care for the self is interrogative of circulating discourses and it resists impositions of meaning. In Socratic character, care for self improves the self through understanding and inspection. It renounces those systems of meaning with which it finds fault. The care for the self can be taken as an explicit example of Foucauldian agency. As such, it illustrates the argument given above, namely that Foucauldian agency is always colored by discursive fields, but never totalized by them:

I would say that if now I am interested, in fact, in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society, and his social group. (1984: 11)

Here, we have a specific case of how, in the exercise of agency, the discursive field asserts its influence. The practices of the self, though practices through which individuals exercise their agency, are nonetheless practices shaped by discourses circulating within a given context. Characterized by links to power which simultaneously limit it and allow its actualization, the ethic of care for the self demonstrates the possibilities and characteristics of Foucauldian agency. A specific case of Foucauldian agency, the care for the self also fits with an Arendtian account of action. Through the assertion of individual understanding, the care for the self is an assertion of one's uniqueness, of
Arendtian distinctness; as an artistic practice of self-creation, the care for the self is an exercise of natality; and because the self which is cared for is projected symbolically in deed and action, because this projection itself is something which is cared for, the care for the self is, finally, a symbolic process. What the account of care for the self adds to the Arendtian account of action is a specific possibility for its emergence. Just as Scott's everyday resistance demonstrates how Arendtian action can be exercised daily, Foucault's ethic of care for the self reveals how Arendtian action, through its exercise, might not only disclose the identity of an agent, but also participate in the constitution of the disclosed identity. In other words, Foucault demonstrates that political action not only has the ability to reveal the self, but also to construct, deconstruct, and rebuild it.

Added to Arendt and Scott, Foucault's theories of power and discourse map out the specific microphysics through which poetic agency can be exercised. Foucault details the character of the symbolic world and accounts for how its manipulation is fundamentally a political process. Foucault encourages us to critically interrogate the systems of meaning surrounding marginalized groups, for discourses of youth, the peasantry, and so forth will be tied to power just like discourses of madness. Through his relational account of power, Foucault explains the possibilities for resistance in even the most asymmetrical power relations. Power can only be exercised in relation to a free subject, and in this way relations of domination are never totalizing. The systems of meaning which actors can access and manipulate through poetic agency can have grave material impacts on their welfare. So it is that poetic agency can become a form of resistance: members of marginalized groups can manipulate discourses of their social groups, thereby altering the
symbolic and material distributions which contribute to their marginalization. Through practicing the care for the self, members of marginalized groups can also create new realities, carrying out an aesthetics of self-invention that resists the imposition of identity and meaning. The account of the care for the self contributes to the theory of poetic agency in that it identifies one of the most common forms poetic agency will assume. Practicing care for the self necessarily involves the actualization of natality, the manipulation of meaning, and the disclosure of the "who." Always a case of Arendtian action, the care for the self is also almost always a case of resistance. Having mapped the nature of the symbolic, having identified its ties to power and the individual, and having characterized a specific emergence of Arendtian action, the addition of Foucault to Arendt and Scott allows a powerful theory of poetic agency to emerge.

Poetic agency is characterized by three necessary conditions: the actualization of natality, the transmission of meaning, and the disclosure of the "who." Poetic agency takes these necessary conditions from Arendt. Poetic agency is also characterized by three particular manifestations: Arendtian power (involving both practices of community and remembrance), everyday acts, and the care for the self. This latter set of three describes particular forms it will be common for poetic agency to assume. In building a theory of poetic agency, we have encountered a certain number of tensions. We will look for these when we suspect poetic agency to be present. We will look, for example, for the mixture of self-interested and resistant intentions in the consciousness of the poetic agent. When
we suspect the presence of care for the self, we will attempt to detect the presence of imposed identities and controlling discourses. As we locate poetic action and poetic agents, we will ask what it is about prevailing systems of meaning which have forced this particular recourse—what it is within the symbolic distribution against which the poetic agent struggles. We will ask these questions, look for these tensions, and test the explanatory power of this theory in the case of Israeli and Palestinian youth.
Shministim and Dheisheh Camp: Case Studies of Israeli and Palestinian Youth

In this second part of the paper, the theory of poetic agency will be put to work in attempt to interpret two case studies involving Israeli and Palestinian youth. The first case study concerns Shministim, Israeli youth who, graduating high school, refuse mandatory service in the Israeli Defense Forces. The second case concerns the practices of Palestinian youth living in Bethlehem’s Dheisheh refugee camp. The activities of these youth include creating works of visual art, performing theatre, building social networks on Facebook, telling stories, and writing and recording rap music. It was, in large part, through encounters with Shministim and youth in Dheisheh while in the field and through subsequent attempts to explain their practices that my belief in the need for an account of poetic agency developed.

In choosing a mode of presentation for these case studies of poetic agency, I have chosen to frame the analyses in terms of what poetic agency is responding to. In other words, as a way of approaching the poetic agency found in Shministim and Dheisheh camp, I have organized the respective analyses by first presenting what it is I think poetic agency is being exercised against in each particular instance. This method of organization achieves two purposes. First, this framing—or one similar to it—is necessary in order to hope to achieve a meaningful analysis of the poetic agency in question. To take an example discussed above, it would have been impossible for Scott, for instance, to meaningfully assess the everyday resistance he located among Malaysian
peasants if he did not first understand and contextualize the forces the peasantry pursued political action in relation to, namely, the land owners. In the same way, identifying the poetic agency of Israeli and Palestinian youth requires that we understand the relational character and context in which that poetic agency obtains. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to present a sweeping reading of the dynamics of power in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict/occupation zone, it is possible here to identify certain power dynamics to which particular poetic agencies seem to be responding. This, then, is the second purpose of the oppositional mode of organization adopted here: to identify a particular mode and exercise of poetic agency from among its multifarious manifestations in Israel-Palestine. Framing in terms of a particular power relation allows us to meaningfully understand a particular poetic agency and it also helps us to pinpoint a particular poetic agency for analysis. Granted, it must be kept in mind that by excluding many power relations within the context—power relations ranging from occupation, to gender, to class, and so forth—the analysis will necessarily overlook important processes and interactions. However, given the scope of this paper, it is this path which must be adopted in order to avoid an analysis hopelessly broad and shallow.

For comparative purposes, I have focused in both case studies on what I take to be a similar power relation: the exercise of poetic agency by youth against imposed and controlling discourses of youth. I begin each case study by identifying dominant discourses of youth circulating within the given spacial and symbolic context. I then proceed to analyze the particular poetic agencies which have emerged among Israeli and Palestinian youth, respectively, as poetic agencies to reject and remake these discourses of youth. The focus of both case studies on this particular set of power relations—poetic
agency against dominant discourses of youth—is particularly relevant as a point of application for the previous theoretical dialectic because this particular set of power relations involves a poetic agency which demonstrates all three of the “particular manifestations” articulated earlier: the actualization of Arendtian power, an everyday nature, and the practice of care for the self. While the three necessary conditions of poetic agency—the actualization of natality, symbolic transmission, and the disclosure of the “who”—must obviously always be present in its realization, the case studies selected here are particular insightful in that they not only involve the demonstration of these necessary conditions being met, but they also offer evidence and particular examples of the more “optional” or “occasional” characteristics of poetic agency being exercised.

This second section of the paper is in four parts. First, I begin with a brief word on method not included in the introductory pages. Second, I offer a short introduction to the opposite pole of the power relation in question: discourses of youth. Third, I present the case study of the Shministim, analyzing their exercise of poetic agency against militarized discourses of youth. Finally, I give the case study of Dheisheh camp, detailing the deployment of poetic agency by its youth against discourses of youth often violent and mythologized.

The methodology of this paper is a reflection of its theoretical commitments. As it is concerned with the poetic agency of a marginalized group, and as it is particularly concerned with contextually situated and dynamic systems of meaning, the paper deploys
a type of political ethnography (Schatz 2009a) which influenced data collection (participant observation, immersion, in-depth interviews) and, more broadly, operates throughout the paper through an “ethnographic sensibility,” i.e., an effort to put at the fore the “the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality” (Schatz 2009b: 5; Wedeen 2009). An ethnographic sensibility aligns with the paper’s normative and theoretical commitments in that all give deference to the lived experiences of subjects as they narrate and perform them. Beyond “normative grounding,” an ethnographic method offers “detailed evidence,” “theoretical vibrancy,” and “the promise of epistemological innovation” to the researcher (Schatz 2009b: 11). It is a method particularly well suited for this paper, because ethnography helps us to re-conceptualize the political (Schatz 2009b: 10), to locate power in overlooked places (Kubik 2009: 36; ), and to interrogate constructed realities such as discourse (Kubik 2009: 46; Wedeen 2009). As I both locate power and connect power to meaning, I deploy both “positivist” and “interpretive” ethnography (Kubik 2009: 49). Finally, the ethnography used here is also “postmodern” in that it is multi-sited and is suspicious of the “authorial authority of the interpreter” (Kubik 2009: 43). Respecting the latter sensibility, the paper presents at length primary texts.

The paper draws upon field work conducted in Israel and the OPT during the summer of 2010. Methods of data collection included participant observation and in-depth interviews. I participated in seminars and focus groups located at Israeli and Palestinian universities and non-governmental organizations. All youth interviewed identified as eighteen years of age or older. All names have been substituted. I surveyed public spaces and artwork throughout Israel and the West Bank, especially Palestinian
graffiti found in refugee camps and on the Israeli Separation Wall. Interviews were conducted in English, solicited through a "snowball method," and most often occurred at hubs of youth activity—universities, refugee camps, theatres, organizational headquarters, and the like. I observed multiple protests involving Palestinian youth. Before and after the period of field research, I surveyed online music videos, web sites, and interviews produced by or involving Israeli and Palestinian youth. Additionally, I surveyed the literature on the subject of study.

This paper is not primarily concerned with conceptualizing youth as a rigid age-based category. While age ought to be taken into account in questions of youth, it is much more in the theoretical spirit of this paper to consider youth, in the main, as a discursively constituted category created by interplays of power including power dynamics emerging from youth themselves. While the youth interviewed in the case studies all qualify as such by universalist age-based definitions, the Israeli and Palestinian youth with which this paper is concerned might not always do so. However, I believe there are good reasons for considering these individuals youth nonetheless. In the Palestinian case, for instance, it is often said to researchers that Palestinian schoolchildren are "not like children elsewhere" or "not like children in America." What has been identified as a "culture of resistance" is said to pervade Palestinian space, leading, among other things, to the early maturation of children. In large part, this image of the Palestinian child as a precocious political resister has arisen through remembrance and myth making of the
stone-throwing child confronting the Israeli Defense Forces in the *intifada*. On the other end of the age spectrum, Palestinians in their middle and late twenties have their own case to make for consideration as youth, namely through their participation in "waithood"—a concept which has been used to describe the life situations of young people throughout the Middle East, including those living in Palestinian space (Yousef 2009). An individual in waithood is characterized by being educated, unemployed, unmarried, unable to access credit, and unable to relocate. This condition is prevalent for young Arab men from adolescence into the thirties. Despite their age, the older among this group, it might be argued, still merit classification as youth given the relative economic and political marginalization they share with the acknowledged members of that category. Through examples such as this, the culturally constructed nature of youth emerges. This paper will conceptualize youth in this way: as a contested symbolic category.

"Youth" must be understood as a discourse, more accurately as a multiplicity of dynamic discourses that shift across time and space, that are subject to unceasing construction and deconstruction, and that are the sites of politicized contests among infinite power relations.¹¹ That discourses of youth are ontologically so has been glimpsed by analysts, particularly in discussions of what is referred to as "the manipulation of the labels 'child' and youth" (Schwartz 2010: 6). McEvoy-Levy, for example, notes the tendency "to equate children with victimization and youth...with perpetration" (2006: 4). This reflects, she argues, "assumptions about what is acceptable or unacceptable for 'our' children and 'their' children, assumptions that may be tied to foreign policy interests or gender

¹¹ This paragraph taken from an essay written for PO 490 in fall of 2010.
stereotypes" (2006: 4). Thus, "youth" is not only "socially constructed" and "historically variable," but also "highly contestable" (2006: 3). A salient example of the "manipulation of labels" occurs in the context of child soldiering. Whether child soldiers are to be "victims," "perpetrators," or something in between is often a function of political interests (Lee 2009). Analyses of "manipulation" such as these are beginning to grasp the discursive, contested nature of youth as sketched above. However, theoretical work remains in moving beyond "manipulation" as an aberrant and occasional phenomenon that occurs in a descending power dynamic as elites "manipulate" "labels" in their interests. The struggle for discourses of youth must be recognized as omnipresent, always ongoing, occurring not only from the "top-down" but also from the "bottom-up," involving complex webs of meaningmaking that make even a double vector seem hopelessly obsolete.

The formation of discourses of youth is fundamentally a political process, for how youth are perceived and how youth perceive themselves affect how youth act, how youth are acted upon, and what youth receive. Criminalized discourses of youth might call for policing, surveillance, and incarceration, while victimized discourses of youth might lead to foreign aid or military intervention. Discourses of youth can also be adopted by youth themselves, thereby influencing not only how youth are treated, but also how youth choose to treat themselves and to treat others. Discourses of youth are political because they are tied up with processes of social control, with the forms of political action youth undertake, and with the distribution of resources and punishments youth receive. Symbolic politics cannot be separated from formal politics. "Politics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, over the management
and appropriation of meanings” (Wedeen 1999: 31). Discourses of youth are sites of symbolic contests, sites in which youth themselves have a say through the exercise of poetic agency.

Before presenting the case studies, a qualification is necessary on the language “Israeli and Palestinian youth.” This wording is often used here as a shorthand for “certain Israeli and Palestinian youth who are involved with the kinds of political actions with which I am concerned.” When I speak of Israeli and Palestinian youth as poetic agents, I am, of course, referring to an agency which all Israeli and Palestinian youth have the potential to exercise. However, it is obviously not the case that all Israeli and Palestinian youth are primarily concerned with exercising this agency. Some, for instance, deploy acts of violence and terror—acts which, though symbolic, have difficulty meeting other criteria of poetic agency. In short, rather than repeatedly add the qualification that I am speaking about only a particular subset of Israeli and Palestinian youth, I have adopted the shorthand described here. Similarly, when, in the second case study, I speak of the “youth living in Dheisheh” or “youth in Dheisheh,” I am employing a related shorthand: “youth in Dheisheh” should be read as something like “a certain number of youth living in Dheisheh camp who engage in the political action being discussed at present.” Additionally, although many youth living in Dheisheh engage in a certain number of common and collective practices, I do not mean to suggest that all youth in Dheisheh are well characterized as poetic agents.
The dominant discourse of youth in Israel is youth as soldier. Although this discourse, like all discourses, is tied up with power and subject to change, the Israeli youth with whom I spoke repeatedly emphasized the dominance of the soldier discourse. While many Israeli youth embrace the discourse of youth as soldier, certain others have elected to reject and remake it. Among the most prominent of the latter have been the Shministim, Israeli youth who, in their final year of high school, have refused to participate in mandatory military service upon graduation. Through their refusal to participate in military service, and through their proposal of alternative measures youth might undertake to serve society, Shministim, I argue, exercise a poetic agency which remakes the discourse of youth as solider. I begin this case study by tracing the character of this discourse through presentation of research data and citation of secondary literature. I then turn to the example of Shministim, locating the exercise of poetic agency within its political action.

Navah is a student and youth activist at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Formerly an artillery instructor in the Israeli Defense Forces, she now helps to lead service learning classes at the university. As someone who interacts with Israeli youth daily, Navah, herself a youth, had this to say about the place of youth in Israeli society:

How are youth perceived in Israel? Being a soldier, that's the first thing. Adults see young people as soldiers. ... The military has a bigger role in socialization than the school. You go through very intense brain training. They need for youth to have a discourse of the other as an enemy. When you are very young you see it as black and white. You are young and can
be taken advantage of. You can be manipulated. ... It’s not a conspiracy, no smoky room. They are not going to take high school students to see the wall. It’s part of the socialization process. People need to think we are right. If people here start to question Zionism and Israel, then everything falls apart. It’s not sustainable.

For Navah, the dominant discourse of youth in Israel is youth as soldier. She notes that this is especially how adults see youth, and suggests in the process that youth might not see themselves in quite the same way. However, how youth see themselves, Navah notes, cannot be separated from a process of “brain training” which youth undergo in preparation for military service. She says that youth are socialized to “have a discourse of the other as an enemy,” the unspoken corollary being that the purpose of military training is to prepare youth to defend society from that enemy. It is an enemy logic that symbolizes youth as soldiers. The discourse, then, is “not a conspiracy,” but rather a discourse that emerges from deeply situated ways of thinking about the other, the state, and the relations between the two.

In another narrative, Dafne, a young human rights activist, identifies processes propelling Israeli youth to embrace military service and to avoid political activism:

There are teachers in the school and there are soldiers in the school. You are a part of it, and it’s hard to differentiate. You can go and talk to both of them. ... The army, the way people treat it in high school, it’s not different from the way you [Americans] treat college. When you’re sixteen, you start to prepare for the SAT. Here, when we’re in high school, we prepare for the army—what unit we’ll try to be in, where we’ll serve, whatever. ...
Politically active youth are a tiny minority. One of the reasons is military service. Military service is so mainstream, so it’s like, if you’re a political activist, it’s like you’re endangering Israel. You know, people think “the military is on the border to protect you,” so if you’re against the military, you want my family to die. There is not much nuance to this thinking. So even if you’re not against the military, just against occupation, or policies A, B, C, people don’t see that nuanced version. You’re just against the military. This has a lot to do with propaganda on the left. When you hear ISM [International Solidarity Movement] and people all around the world talking about how Israel is the worst army ever, people conflate that radical rhetoric with nuanced positions against the military.

Also, there is still a mentality of siege, you know, how Jews didn’t have any other place to go. Anti-Semitism is promoted all over the place. The Holocaust is all over the history books. All you remember from school is the Holocaust. If I’m not mistaken, the history curriculum is divided into like ten sections, and two of those sections are on anti-Semitism. Then you have Holocaust memorial day every year. You have to celebrate in every way. But my grandfather was in Auschwitz. So it is very personal. …

In the 11th grade you have the trip to Poland. They call it a “roots trip.” I don’t even know how many of the families were actually ever from Poland. There are Israeli flags everywhere. I mean, it’s really manipulative. There is also an economic divide, because the school
doesn’t pay the entire cost of the trip. You have to pay like one thousand dollars and so some don’t go. But even so, the trip is still felt by everyone. I mean, for two weeks there isn’t any school, and everyone knows about the trips, where you are.

For Dafne, Israeli youth are encouraged to take up the role of soldier by a multiplicity of pressures. Emotional, nationalistic, economic, and career motivations move youth to embrace military service. The impetuses are deeply rooted in historical events, and they continuously exert themselves upon Israeli youth across temporal and physical space. Furthermore, there are consequences for youth who repudiate the military. Those who do might be seen as “endangering Israel.” As Dafne noted later, there are also social pressures to serve: “If you’re a man and you didn’t serve, then you’re a faggot.” Additionally, Israeli youth see military service as an economic issue. A youth who had refused to serve said the following of the aftermath:

I couldn’t even find a job as a waitress. The second paragraph on the form is always about your army service. … If there are two equal employees, one who served in the army and one who didn’t, you know the one they’re going to pick.

Several themes emerge from the narratives of these Israeli youth. First, youth as soldier is identified as a dominant discourse of youth. Second, the discourse is understood to arise from a complex interplay of historical forces. Third, youth as soldier is deeply ingrained into Israeli social space: in schools, homes, the military, social networks, and so forth. Finally, the primacy of the discourse is protected in part by a system of consequences that are met at refusal.
These points are reflected in contemporary scholarship. Militarism has been recognized as a pervasive force in Israeli society (Kimmerling 2001; Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 1999). Not merely a mode periodically adopted, militarism is intricately intertwined with the Israeli social fabric, manifesting itself in schools, parades, performances, voyages to Poland, public rituals, memorials, museums, holidays, preparation for military service, military service itself, reserve duty, social networks, employment, social status, marriage, and politics (Adelman 2003; Feldman 2008; Golan 1997; Hazan 2001; Helman 1999; Kimmerling 2001; Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 1999; Maman et al. 2001; Mazali 2003; Sered 2000). Youth are connected to all of these spheres. In many of them, youth are the primary participants. Israeli youth are submerged in what Kimmerling identifies as a “militarism of the mind” or a “total militarism” (2001: 214-215). As the narratives above note, it is not a conspiracy, but rather a function of historical processes and their contemporary representations (Ben-Eliezer 1998; Shapira 1992). Among these lie the origins of the discourse of youth as soldier.

The contemporary discourse carries certain nuances. First, it is more accurate to speak of a defender discourse than a soldier discourse. As implied in the narratives above, the overarching duty of youth is to defend the state materially and ideologically through a diversity of practices. Soldiering is merely the most salient manifestation of this duty. Gendering the analysis, for example, we find that the role of young women is not so much to defend the state by soldiering, but rather to defend the state by defending oneself and by allowing oneself to be defended by men (Adelman 2003; Golan 1997; Izraeli 2001; Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 2007; Mazali 2003; Sered 2000). Young women are dissuaded from serving in combat positions. Their period of service is shorter, and they
are more easily exempted from service altogether. Even in the military, they are
constructed as “helpless victims” and “vulnerable bodies” (Sered 2000: 88). Above all,
young female soldiers must not be raped by the enemy (Sered 2000). They must be
protected by strong young men, those who combat enemy forces and in the process prove
their masculinity to their peers (Ben-Ari 2001). Gendered military experiences suggest
that a soldier discourse is too narrow. A defender discourse better captures the diverse
experiences of Israeli youth.12 It also accommodates the ideological defenses in which
youth are expected to participate.

A second refinement of the discourse is found in what has been identified as a
move from “obligatory militarism” to “contractual militarism” (Levy et al. 2007). In the
former, military service is perceived as “an unconditioned, mandatory national duty,”
while in the latter it must be reconciled with “the individual’s ambitions and interests”
(Levy et al. 2007: 127). It is argued that certain forces—market liberalization and post-
Zionism—have created a new relationship between the military and Israeli youth (Levy
2003; Levy et al. 2007; Peri 2001; Ram 2008; Zemlinskaya 2008). Market liberalization
has decreased what Levy et al. identify as the “convertibility” of military service, i.e., the
benefits military service bestows for life in the civilian sector. Historically, military
service granted Israeli soldiers financial rewards and social prestige which translated into
gains in the civilian workforce (Levy et al. 2007: 129). However, with the liberalization
of the Israeli economy, the convertibility of these benefits has declined. This decline has
been especially salient for wealthy Ashkenazi Jews. For this social group, the opportunity
cost of military service has escalated. Economic opportunities are increasingly global and

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12 In addition to the gendered experiences mentioned here, substantial differences among Israeli youth exist
along other lines. Especially notable are differences between Ashkenazi youth and Sephardi youth, between
secular youth and religious youth, and between Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian/Arab-Israeli youth.
dynamic, and so military service is no longer a necessary or even a preferable gateway to economic prosperity (Levy et al. 2007). Additionally, the ideology of market liberalization has compromised ideological allegiance to military service. Israeli youth are increasingly characterized by individualism rather than collectivism, wanting military service to “work for them,” as it were—something it is doing less and less in a globalized market economy (Levy et al. 2007). Levy et al. also note that the prestige of military service has declined from its historical high. Particularly relevant for this decline was the international outrage at Israeli military policy during the first intifada—policy which was perceived as oppressive and unnecessarily brutal. Convertibility, then, has declined not only because the economic benefits of military service have lessened, but also because the prestige of military service has fallen. Finally, the advent of post-Zionism—an outlook which, in essence, conceptualizes Israel as a democratic, heterogeneous, and market-oriented state rather than a Jewish state—has brought into contestation the ideological allegiance of Israelis to conscripted service in a highly nationalized military (Zemlinskaya 2008). As in the case of market liberalization, post-Zionism has affected primarily wealthy, secular Ashkenazi Israelis. The members of this social group have the most to gain from market liberalization, and they have the least to lose from post-Zionism in terms of ideological and religious investment. The results of these economic and ideological trends has been the shift to “contractual militarism” Levy et al. identify. Military service is increasingly perceived as something which ought to benefit the individual (a “contract” with him or her), not merely the collective. Given their economic and ideological standing, wealthy, secular Ashkenazi Jews have been the strongest proponents of contractual militarism. As a result, it is primarily youth from this social
group who make up the ranks of those who refuse to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces (Zemlinskaya 2008).

The sum of the narratives and scholarship surveyed here is a discourse of Israeli youth as a contractual defender. The discourse depicts youth as militarized defenders of the state, though defenders increasingly self-interested and less concerned with their duties to the collective. The mover of the process is a system of evolving economic and ideological forces. What is left out of this picture is the poetic agency of youth themselves.

*Shministim* provides perhaps the most salient example of poetic agency being exercised against the discourse of youth as contractual defender. *Shministim*, a term which technically refers to Israeli youth in the final year of high school (Hebrew for “twelfth graders”), has come to designate those youth who, at the time of conscription, refuse to serve. In 2001, they wrote the following letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon:

> We, the undersigned, youths who grew up and were brought up in Israel, are about to be called to serve in the IDF. We protest before you against the aggressive and racist policy pursued by the Israeli government and its army, and to inform you that we do not intend to take part in the execution of this policy.

> We strongly resist Israel's pounding of human rights. Land expropriation, arrests, executions without a trial, house demolition, closure, torture, and
the prevention of health care are only some of the crimes the state of Israel carries out, in blunt violation of international conventions it has ratified.

These actions are not only illegitimate; they do not even achieve their stated goal—increasing the citizens’ personal safety. Such safety will be achieved only through a just peace agreement between the Israeli government and the Palestinian people.

Therefore we will obey our conscience and refuse to take part in acts of oppression against the Palestinian people, acts that should properly be called terrorist actions. We call upon persons our age, conscripts, soldiers in the standing army, and reserve service soldiers to do the same.

A second letter, written in 2009, will also be useful to consider:

We are all community activists and contribute in various ways to a variety of sectors in the Israeli society. We believe that contribution, cooperation and volunteerism are a way of life, and should not be limited to just two or three years. Our conscientious objection stems directly from our volunteer experience, from the values we believe in, from our love of the society that we are a part of and in which we live, from our respect of every human being, and from the aim of making our country a better place for all of its inhabitants. …

The claim put forth by the spokespersons of the government and the army, that the continuation of the occupation arises from security reasons, has no
substance. No country that has fought for its independence has ever been defeated by military means. The suffering of the Palestinian people and their subjugation is the cause of violent resistance. Israel’s public will never be safe as long as the Palestinian nation is under occupation. There is no military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—only peace will ensure life and security for Jews and Arabs in this country.

In Israeli society it is a matter of fact that at 18, every young man and woman partakes in military service. However, we cannot ignore the truth—the occupation is an extreme situation, violent, racist, inhuman, illegal, non democratic, and immoral, that is life threatening for both nations. We that have been brought up on values of liberty, justice, righteousness, and peace cannot accept it.

Our objection to becoming soldiers of the occupation stems from our loyalty to our values and to the society surrounding us, and it is part of our ongoing struggle for peace and equality, a struggle whose Jewish-Arab nature proves that peace and co-existence is possible. This is our way, and we are willing to pay the price.\(^\text{13}\)

In writing these letter, the youth of Shministim exercise poetic agency. Through the acts of composition and dissemination, Shministim fulfill all three of the conditions necessary for poetic action. And through their initial acts of refusal, through the acts of introspection which preceded their refusals, and through the subsequent act of coming...

together as a group to write these letters, Shministim exercise everyday action, actualize Arendtian power, and practice care for the self.

The actualization of natality is characterized by creation. Natality is actualized when one creates a new reality or reshapes an old reality in a new way through the assertion of one’s distinctness. Among the many realities created by the composition and dissemination of the letters above is the reality of new and reshaped discourses of youth. The letters cited here actualize natality in virtue of their recreation of the discourse of youth as contractual defender. Moreover, a new discourse of youth is created—one in which youth support society in ways not assigned to them by dominant discourse. Natality is actualized here as Shministim create and recreate discourse in at least three ways. First, the Shministim remake the notion of defense. For these youth, defense of society is best achieved by resisting militarism physically and ideologically. This is diametric to the meaning of defense under the prevailing discourse. The Shministim hold that Israel’s military campaign (its “pounding of human rights”) does not increase the safety of Israeli citizens. Consequently, youth who would defend Israel should refuse to serve in its military. Second, the Shministim cite moral concerns as motivation. In opposition to the market-oriented and self-interested contractual defender, these youth claim to be following their “conscience.” The language they deploy (e.g., “racist” and “just”) suggests the presence of ethical concerns unaccounted for in the dominant discourse. Finally, these youth display a commitment to an expanded collective. It is not simply that the Shministim endorse collectivism against the individualism of the contractual defender. Rather, they embrace a collectivism more collective than that which they are supposed to have abandoned. For these Israeli youth, the collective is not only
composed of Israelis, but also Palestinians. Concern for the enemy is not a characteristic assigned to youth within the discourse of youth as contractual defender. By remaking discourses involving defense, motivation, and collectivism, Shministim ultimately recreate discourses of youth and thereby actualize natality.

The creation which characterizes natality arises out of the assertion of distinctness. Thus, the actualization of natality is always bound up with the disclosure of the “who”—a linkage which remains close knit in this case. The disclosure of the “who” is a revelatory act, often unconscious, in which the actor shows his or her unique identity to others. What is interesting about this particular instance of disclosure is that the Shministim seem very conscious of the distinct identities they are disclosing—likely, I would venture, due to the sharp contrast between their revelations and the discourse of youth as contractual defender. Two levels of distinct identity are at work in this instance of disclosure. The first is the distinctness of each individual Shministim. The second is the distinctness of the collective identity—“our conscience”—from the identity of youth presented in the discourse of youth as contractual defender. “All community activists,” the Shministim are explicit in their disclosure of those unique aspects of their identity which set them apart: “Our conscientious objection stems directly from our volunteer experience, from the values we believe in, from our love of the society that we are a part of and in which we live, from our respect of every human being, and from the aim of making our country a better place for all of its inhabitants.” The unique identities Shministim disclose involve association with volunteerism, love of society, and respect for human beings. The distinctness which is disclosed is not necessarily absent from the identities of others, but the Shministim have chosen to give it precedence in their
individual cases. In identifying themselves as "we that have been brought up on values of liberty, justice, righteousness, and peace," they suggest that which makes them distinct from others is not something totally absent from the identities of others—rather, the Shministim, like other Israelis, were brought up with certain values, yet the Shministim have set themselves apart by choosing to uphold those values rather than neglect them, or at least by choosing to interpret the meanings of those values differently. By identifying themselves openly as adherents to a distinct value system, the Shministim disclose the "who."

The final necessary condition for the exercise of poetic agency—symbolic transmission—is clearly fulfilled in this case. In the initial act of refusal, in the dissemination of letters, in interviews with the public, in the endurance of prison sentences, discriminations, and public humiliations, the Shministim communicate explicitly their intentions to others.

An interesting feature of this instance of poetic agency is its realization of all three of the "particular manifestations" theorized earlier. The Shministim's refusal is an everyday act. It is not an everyday act because the declaration of refusal is a quotidian occurrence, but rather because Shministim's refusal involves a sequence of quotidian acts which continue long after the period of initial declaration. Following the first act of refusal, Shministim adopt new strategies of negotiation and survival. Economically, politically, and socially marginalized, Shministim continue to make meanings daily as they interact with and confront families and friends, as they struggle to find employment, as they battle in court, as they search for acceptance, and as they share their stories with those they encounter. In this way, Shministim exercise an everyday agency that continues
to challenge meanings of youth, defense, and the state long after the initial declaration of refusal has passed. Arendtian power is actualized when individuals collectively engage in creative, non-coercive action. This, it would seem, is exactly what Shministim are doing. As discussed above, their acts are inherently creative, making and remaking discourses of youth. Their action is the antithesis of coercion—it is coercion they have united against, i.e., the coercion to serve in the military despite their convictions. The collective nature of their action is evident from their letters. The frequent use of the plural pronoun is accompanied at the letters' end by lists of signatures—bold identifications with a collectivity which has openly violated the law. Arendtian power is characterized by the creation of community. Shministim constitute an alternative community, a group of individuals gathered together in opposition to militarism and occupation. Finally, the poetic agency of Shministim qualifies as care for the self. The practice of care for the self is characterized by introspection, by treating one's self as a work of art to which one adds, subtracts, and adjusts in accordance with one's own understanding. The care for the self rejects the imposition of identities with which it finds fault. Shministim do all of these things. They interrogate their own convictions, the norms of society, the practices of occupation, the meaning of defense and the collective, and having made these interrogations, Shministim reject the identities with which they are presented. They decide to constitute themselves through practices and positions of their own development and understanding. They engage in self-guided self invention, not blind adherence to militarized norms. Shministim, in short, not only engage in the exercise of poetic agency, but they do so in everyday fashion, actualizing power and caring for self in the process.
Palestinian youth have been discursively constructed as resisters to occupation since at least the first *intifada*. Over time, this discourse of resister has taken on increasingly violent connotations, especially following the advent of martyrdom operations. In this case study, I first trace the rise of the resister discourse as a discourse of Palestinian youth. I then map the discursive merger of violence and resistance and the subsequent inscription of this hybrid discourse onto Palestinian youth. Following this process of discursive identification, I present the case of Palestinian youth living in Bethlehem’s Dheisheh refugee camp. These youth, I argue, are exercising poetic agency and remaking discourses of youth within Palestinian symbolic space. Through everyday processes such as rapping, storytelling, dancing, and the like, youth in Dheisheh camp are making and transmitting meanings, revealing their identities, creating communities, and constituting themselves through their conduct.

John Collins argues that since the advent of the *intifada*, Palestinian youth have have been “understood, categorized, researched, and symbolically appropriated” by a certain number of “rhetorical modes,” i.e., by certain number of discourses (2004: 38). Especially notable among them is the discourse of hero, a discourse which was inscribed onto Palestinian youth, especially male youth, during the intifada (Abufarha 2009; Bucaille 2004; Collins 2004; Peteet 1994). Youth who took up stones against Israeli tanks have been mythologized in Palestinian discourse, transformed into “children of the stones,” heroic figures who not only resisted Israeli occupation, but who also sent
symbolic messages abroad, especially to the United States and to Arab regimes negligent in their concern for the Palestinian plight. The discourse of hero appropriated the actions of these youth. Vexing soldiers, enduring beatings, and going to prison became heroic acts. The discourse of youth as hero which emerged from the intifada was predominantly male, tied to symbolic violence, and associated with enduring suffering for the Palestinian cause.

The connotations attached to the discourse underwent dramatic changes in the decade following the intifada, a process which culminated in the second uprising of the early millenium (Abufarha 2009). Many Palestinian youth were disenchanted with the Oslo Accords. Within Palestinian society, youth were frustrated by political exclusion and by attempts to reset social hierarchies which had been been upset during the intifada (Bucaille 2004). Winning the support of the international community appeared to many to have been a worthless endeavor. These conditions led some to make a tactical shift from symbolic to overt violence. Martyrdom operations began in 1994, and during the ensuing decade, those who executed them were elevated in Palestinian discourse (Abufarha 2009). Increasingly, the discourse of hero took on violent connotations. In his ethnography of Palestinian resistance, Abufarha notes the rise of the “istishhadi,” the “martyrous one,” an “active notion that emphasizes the heroism in the act of sacrifice”:

The istishhadiyeen have captured the imagination of Palestinian youth and the general public. … The istishhadi now carries new meanings and qualities above that of the shahid. The image of the istishhadi is the icon of the Palestinian resistance, replacing the icon of the shahid of the first
intifada and the notion fida'i, which was the icon of resistance in the 1960s and 1970s. (Abufarha 2009: 10)

The discourse of istishhadi has displaced the discourses of shahid and fida'i which previously dominated the symbolic space of Palestinian resistance. For Palestinians, “shahid” refers to “anyone killed by the aggressor” (2009: 8). The shahid, then, could be read as the “martyr” (2009: 9). Conversely, the istishhadi is not the “martyr” but rather the “martyrorous one.” The move from shahid to istishhadi is a move in which personal agency is added: “The istishhadi, the hero who carries out a sacrifice mission, is active, whereas the shahid of the first intifada was a victim at the hands of the Israelis” (2009: 77-78). The notion of the istishhadi carries with it the meaning of “self-sacrifice” which characterized the fida'i, the “one who sacrifices self” (2009: 8). The istishhadi, then, combines the notion of sacrifice with the notion of personal agency. Acting intentionally and honorably, the martyrrous ones are to be esteemed and emulated rather than pitied.

The former has been the response of Palestinian society. As Abufarha goes on to note, images and narratives of the istishhadi are circulated by youth groups, schools, and activist communities through photos, notebooks, postcards, booklets, videos, and websites, “memorializing the new life of the martyr in the wider community” (2009: 78).

He observes that the “discourse of martyrdom has achieved such power that the cultural dynamic is defining the form of engagement and resistance, forcing it on some groups and reorganizing society” (2009: 195). The discourse of the istishhadi, then, is threatening to monopolize the meanings of resistance. Those who wish to be considered resisters are pressured to conform to the violent connotations of the martyrdom discourse: “To be recognized as a resistance faction, Palestinian groups are compelled to participate
in the performance of martyrdom (2009: 195). It is through the discourse of the *istishhadi* that the discourse of youth as hero has taken on violent connotations.

Following Abufarha, the martyrdom discourse is being forced upon Palestinian youth as it consumes the conceptual space of resistance (2009: 195). For those who would be widely recognized as resisters, participation in the discourse of martyrdom is the most certain route to success. This is suggested most strongly by the conspicuous displays Abufarha mentions. Throughout Palestinian space, visual markers elevate the *istishhadi* to the pinnacle of resistance. The coercion of youth into the discourse of martyrdom is also suggested by the statements of youth themselves. Asked how they are portrayed and understood by others, Palestinian youth will often respond they are represented mainly as terrorists. For example, the members of the organization Gaza Youth Breaks Out state in their manifesto that they are “sick of being portrayed as terrorists, home-made fanatics with explosives in our pockets and evil in our eyes” (Gaza Youth Breaks Out 2011). This statement is representative of the frustrations of many Palestinian youth. As the members of Gaza Youth Breaks Out suggest, the association of Palestinian youth with terrorism is something which is not necessarily to blamed on the *istishhadi*, but rather on external makers of meaning—those who first inscribe “martyrous ones” with “evil” intent and then generalize the category onto Palestinian youth. There are, then, two distinct acts of inscription at work. First, because of the acts of the *istishhadi*, Palestinian youth are associated with a discourse of violent resistance. Second, because of manipulations of meaning arising from outside of Palestinian society, this discourse of violent resistance is then further inscribed with connotations of evil, irrationality, and fanaticism. For their part, Palestinian youth take greater issue with the
imposition of the second of these discourses than they do with the imposition of the first. They do not mind so much association with the “martyrous ones” as they do association with terrorists. If Palestinian youth attempted to distance themselves from the istishhadi discourse, such an attempt might very well obstruct the inscription of the terrorist discourse, given the links between the two. However, following Abufarha, such a distancing is not a likely course of action given the reverence with which the istishhadi are considered by Palestinians. This reverence, then, is in a sense that which allows the terrorist discourse to circulate. If the istishhadi were not revered, there would be less symbolic space from which the terrorist discourse could emerge. Although Palestinian youth may not be quick to consciously oppose the discourse of istishhadi, this does not necessarily mean that Palestinian youth are not remaking the discourse unintentionally. As I argue below, through nothing other than everyday exercises of poetic agency, Palestinian youth are reshaping discourses which would inscribe violent connotations upon them.

The discourse of Palestinian youth as a violent resister is being remade by the poetic agency of Palestinian youth. Acts of overt violence, though discursively elevated, are not deployed by most. Rather, the forms of political action undertaken by Palestinian youth are overwhelmingly nonviolent. They are not heroic acts, but rather everyday practices of poetic agency. Through this agency, Palestinian youth incrementally redefine the discourses with which they are inscribed, making meanings for themselves which do not center upon heroism and violence. Crucially, this is not to say that Palestinian youth, like the Shministim, intentionally oppose the discourses they are remaking. As Abufarha
notes, the *istishhadi* are revered in popular discourse. The poetic agency of Palestinian youth, then, is not a normative rejection of the discourse of violent resister, but rather an unsuspecting remaking of it through poetic agency. Here, then, is a case demonstrating the Arendtian thesis that political action need not, like resistance, be intentional in its exercise.

As suggested by the mural captured in Figure 1 above, it is through everyday practices of poetic agency that the youth living in Dheisheh overwhelmingly exercise their political action. In the following narrative, Musa, a youth of the camp, describes in detail the manifestations poetic agency takes in his acts and in the acts of his friends:

> For me, when you live under the pressure of the occupation, many people become…children have pressure inside themselves. I have friends painting walls, friends doing art—they are really amazing, trying to see the international people to take them to sell—friends who are rappers, talking about life inside the camp, how they love and hate, how they want and don’t want [to be here]. … Young people here have many hobbies—basketball, football, volleyball. … People use the internet to study, keep them in touch with friends, you can still connect with them for years. You can use the internet to talk about yourself. You can use Facebook. People don’t know that there is a country whose name is Palestine. I add people [on Facebook] every week, every two weeks. …

> Through dancing, you show others about Palestine, about yourself. Some use guns, some use stones, some use dancing. Dancing is a peaceful way.
If you use a gun or a stone, they say you are a terrorist. People enjoy dancing. They clap for you. They respect dancing. So we choose this—to go around the world and tell about Palestine. People start to cry, love us, love what we are doing. They give us presents and gifts. They know we are under occupation. ...

An Italian photographer came and taught us how to talk about ourselves through video, through media. Jews and Israelis have many media and they talk about us. They say we are terrorists...I saw the internationals, they would bring cameras, they would write, and go outside and tell our story. I learned from them...through this you can talk about yourself...My father saw the Italians make a movie about me. He was happy. He saw that our story was told. My parents feel happy and they support me in everything. ...

There was a workshop in the past. Girls were using microphones and cameras. People started to laugh when they got back in the camp. Some people started to laugh. Maybe they thought it was a bullshit way. But after all this I don’t feel hopeless. I know what I am doing is a good way. I don’t give a shit. I know my way. Here, they see a movie about me. They don’t laugh. They see that I told our stories, about our lives in the camp. Then they tell me I’m sorry about that because I didn’t know that you would do this. ...
Here inside the camp there are many old people. One man is older than 100 years. The most important thing for me is the old people. They have the history of Palestine. They know the history of the land. They are like a book. There was an old man, when he died, you felt like you were missing him. Every year we celebrate the Nakba days. We have music and songs. Through this you tell the stories through generations. They give you hope, a way to fight, real information about your land. ... These days many old people have died. When I did photography and video I would go to them. They would tell us stories, tell us about the past and life in forty-eight, about the food, the vegetables—they didn’t cost anything. I have land and I grow fruit and vegetables and I have water and wells and I smell the fresh air. When you sit with them, you imagine you have lived this life before. You feel you are living inside a paradise. ... One day I asked an old man if he had land if he would go back. He said yes. He said today I have nothing to do. He told me about the fruit, how he would just go and pick them. ... They are really good stories. When I get older I will do what they did. We have good connections with others.

Musa’s narrative delineates a multiplicity of practices being deployed daily by Palestinian youth as poetic agency. Whether Musa and these youth realize it or not, their discursive production not only resists occupation, but also remakes discourses of youth. Far from heroics, youth living in Dheisheh use artwork, rap, sports, social media, dancing, video, and storytelling to exert themselves in a symbolic politics. For Musa, it is not necessarily that youth who use stones and guns are wrong to do so. Rather, youth
simply prefer different forms of political action. Musa suggests there are tactical benefits to everyday, nonviolent practice. For example, one might avoid being labeled a terrorist. Additionally, alternative practices can further certain ends. Uploading videos to the internet provides Palestinian youth a way to combat Israeli media. In the case of dance, youth can win over audiences to the Palestinian cause. Through storytelling, youth not only produce discourse, but also reshape it across generations. For Musa, storytelling transmits possibilities, builds solidarity, gives hope, and provides information for political action. It recalls memories and thereby reveals the present as historically situated, a reality able to be changed, one that can be evaluated against possibilities contained in the past. Finally, within Musa’s narrative is a willingness to transgress norms. When his practice is laughed at, Musa does not feel hopeless. Rather, he maintains confidence in his “way” until others realize its value. That his resistance is derided locates it outside of dominant discourses. That it is eventually recognized suggests the work of poetic agency.

Musa’s narrative reveals a multiplicity of political actions being undertaken by Palestinian youth that constitute poetic agency. In addition to meeting all of the necessary conditions for its actualization, these political actions often realize the “particular manifestations” of poetic agency outlined previously.

The actualization of natality is, in at least many of the acts described by Musa, almost self-evident. Rapping, making visual art, producing performative pieces—these are all thoroughly creative acts. And not only do they create physically, but they also create symbolically. Through murals such as that included above, through the spread of rap through cyberspace, through the performance of theatre and dance to international
audiences—through acts such as these Palestinian youth create and remake meanings, exercising natality. In these cases, the symbolic transmissions at work are apparent. Through visual, auditory, and digital avenues, Palestinian youth break into the symbolic world, remaking its fabric and projecting their creations for others to see.

Although, as Arendt notes, the disclosure of the “who” takes place in many unrecognized, everyday acts, it is especially salient here in processes such as storytelling and rapping. In giving an account of one’s self through speech, the unique identity of the agent is revealed explicitly. Additionally, the “who” is disclosed in less obvious ways in the practices Musa describes, for example, in the particular forms less obviously discursive acts assume. The ways in which Palestinian youth choose to interact in sport, in performance, and in the use of social media all obtain in virtue of the assertion of distinctness.

Through collective action such as the formation of Facebook groups, the participatory construction of murals, and dance performance, youth in Dheisheh actualize Arendtian power. In doing so, they bring into being a space of “organized remembrance” in which they can create meaning and infuse events and realities with symbolisms of their own. Exercising both aspects of Arendtian power, the youth in Dheisheh also build community through their actions, making networks of friends on Facebook, connecting with audiences around the world, sharing their stories with visitors to their camp, and so forth.

Through their conduct, youth in Dheisheh throw off imposed identities as they constitute themselves through the care for the self. Not accepting the discourse of violent resister for themselves, the youth who engage in the practices Musa describes participate
in an alternative politics through which they invent themselves as political agents in the world. Musa, for instance, though mocked, is certain of the legitimacy of his "way," of his form of political action. Those who, like Musa, select forms of poetic agency against those offered by circulating discourses of violent resistance demonstrate the sort of self-invention through self-understanding that is characteristic of the care for the self.

A final interesting feature of the poetic agency Musa describes is that many of the youth exercising it appear unaware of the full symbolic effects of their actions. While these youth consciously target occupation through their murals, dance performance, and the like, they do not necessarily target imposing discourses of youth within their own society as oppositional entities in need of remaking. Nonetheless, this remaking is a consequence of their exercise of poetic agency. While the lack of intention might not allow this particular aspect of their act to be considered resistance, it can nevertheless still count as political action following Arendt.

The focus given here to the political actions of youth living in Dheisheh camp is not meant to obscure a great number of similar practices being undertaken by Palestinian youth throughout Palestinian space. Youth in Balata camp south of Nablus produce works of art on alley walls even narrower than those found in Dheisheh. In Jenin camp to the north, youth perform in the Jenin Freedom Theatre, and others participate in the dramatic space of Cinema Jenin. In these camps, as elsewhere, youth readily share stories with visitors, making meanings and building relationships. In cities such as Hebron, and in villages such as Beit Omar and Bil’in, youth are on the frontlines of small scale, weekly non-violent demonstrations against the segregation of urban space and the
annexation of farmland. Youth gather together in Ramallah to smoke and watch football as they discuss politics. On the outskirts of the city, at Berzeit university, youth undertake political action through student organizations despite the repeated arrests of their student leaders. Youth at al-Quds University give tours of their museum to visitors, relaying to them the history of the detention and torture of Palestinians in Israeli prisons. The members of Gaza Youth Breaks Out publish online manifestos and harness social media to make meanings and build communities. Young women form economic collectives that produce scarves, blankets, and embroidery. In less organized form takes place an invisible mass of poetic actions. Youth negotiate checkpoints, replant trees, care for siblings, build homes, write poetry, play sports, manipulate social media, take photographs, tell stories, traverse walls, go to school, paint murals, and make music. Neither the extent nor the efficacy of these actions is easy to assess. However, these actualizations of poetic agency remain political nonetheless, making meanings, disclosing and constituting identities, and building relationships.

Against discourses of youth circulating in their given societies, Israeli and Palestinian youth exercise a poetic agency which reshapes and transmits meaning. Groups of youth such as Shministim and the youth in Dheisheh actualize natality through the creation of new discourse, new communities, and new visual and performative symbols. By boldly declaring their own principles, values, ethical codes, ways of political action, and so forth, these Israeli and Palestinian youth disclose the “who,” revealing to others their
distinct identities. By building communities of like minded youth, by reaching out
digitally across the world, and by sharing stories with passersby, Israeli and Palestinian
youth actualize Arendtian power and assign meaning. Through inspecting, rejecting, and
replacing discursively available identities, these youth care for the self. They invent
themselves through their conduct, redefining what it means to be a youth in their
respective societies. All of this political action is done in everyday fashion—through
quotidian refusals, works of art, stories, activities, and so forth. Israeli and Palestinian
youth exercise political action through poetic agency, altering the distribution of
resources in the symbolic world and thereby remaking the material world, too. Not
contractual defenders or violent resisters, the Israeli and Palestinian youth presented here
are poetic agents who assert themselves through creative, symbolic, and everyday acts
which though often invisible are nonetheless deserving of recognition.
Conclusion

Breaking from traditional conceptions of the political, poetic agency is to be found in creative, symbolic, revelatory acts. Poetic agency happens in the everyday, in small, often overlooked practices through which individuals negotiate their surroundings and make their way through the world. Poetic agency is characterized by building community and by caring for the self. Through poetic agency, individuals enter into new, constructive, non-coercive relations with one another. They refashion themselves in accordance with their own understanding.

The theory of poetic agency emerges from the synthesis of Arendt, Scott, and Foucault. From the first of these theoretical systems poetic agency takes its foundations. Arendt’s theory of action provides the three necessary conditions for poetic agency. It also provides one of its “particular manifestations”: Arendtian power. From Scott, Arendt’s theory learns to look for the political not in political actions as traditionally conceived, but rather in the everyday processes of life. The tensions involved with intention and political action emerge, and the category of resistance is distinguished from that of political action. Foucault provides the microphysics of poetic agency. His theories of discourse and power reveal the characteristics of the symbolic world. Foucault articulates why it is that poetic agency is political, and he provides an account of one manifestation poetic agency might assume, namely, the care for the self.

Israeli and Palestinian youth are poetic agents who actualize natality, make and transmit meaning, and reveal their unique identities. In the case studies examined here,
they do so in opposition to discourses of youth which would limit them and confine them, discourses not of their own making. By inspecting the discourses of contractual defender and violent resister, by determining these discourses to be unfit for themselves, and by rejecting the identities offered by these discourses for identities of their own making, Israeli and Palestinian youth care for the self in acts of self-inventing political action. The new discourses which they create—using letters, symbolic endurances of punishment, visual and performative artworks, social media, storytelling, and the like—are expressions of the unique identities they have fashioned for themselves. It is through the assertion of distinctness that Israeli and Palestinian youth reject and remake discourses of youth circulating within their societies. In exercising their poetic agencies, these youth build communities among themselves and across borders, transmitting meanings and inscribing anew characteristics onto the symbolic world.

The exercise of poetic agency departs from many norms of political action traditionally conceived. Poetic agency, though present in the occasional, organized event, is most often to be found on the streets, in the school, in the camp, online, and on the wall. Although often difficult to pinpoint its effects, poetic agency carries consequences nonetheless, remaking both the symbolic and material worlds. “The limitations of any field of study are most strikingly revealed in its shared definitions of what counts as relevant,” Scott writes. If nothing else, a theory of poetic agency performs this revelatory task, forcing us to critically interrogate our paradigms of the political. If these paradigms would exclude the poetic agencies articulated here, then they themselves are complicit in acts of repression against which there is need for political action.

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